

# Federal funding changes jeopardize Libby cleanup

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Special to the News  
Superfund cleanup in Libby and at the nearby W.R. Grace vermiculite mine could be slowed down or delayed by pending federal funding changes, according to a new research report.

The Montana Public Interest Research Group said Monday that cleanup at nine of 13 Superfund sites in Montana may be in jeopardy because of the Bush administration's position on Superfund funding.

Libby is not included in the 13 sites because it has not gotten final Superfund National Priority List status. Gov. Judy Martz last December asked the federal gov-

ernment to sidestep the conventional listing process and use the "silver bullet" fast-track approach to cleanup.

The report said Libby may be particularly vulnerable to pending program cuts because of the enormity of the cleanup project. The federal Environmental Protection Agency estimates cleanup costs for the Libby area at more than \$50 million.

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"To see the possibility of future Superfund sites are going to be borne by the taxpayer, it's totally ridiculous," said Gayla Benefield, president of the Lincoln County Asbestos Victims Relief Organization. "If the Superfund tax isn't reinstated now, the cost of cleanups will be borne by the taxpayers and the wage earners instead of the actual polluters."

The Libby community is still reeling from widespread asbestos contamination from the vermiculite mine. Hundreds of people have died from asbestos poisoning and thousands—including Benefield and her husband—

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have been diagnosed with asbestos disease.

Under the Bush administration, the pace of Superfund cleanup has slowed by more than 50 percent, the report said. The administration requested about \$1.4 billion less from Congress than is projected to adequately fund the cleanup of the nation's most contaminated sites.

Two years ago, Congress commissioned a study to determine a blueprint of budget requests to meet the future needs of the Superfund program, but the administration has failed to follow this blueprint, said David Ponder, executive director of MontPIRG.

The Bush administration also opposes the reauthorization of the Superfund's polluter taxes, which increases the taxpayer burden, Ponder said.

By 2003, taxpayers will pay about \$700 million, or 54 percent of the Superfund budget, to clean up the nation's worst toxic sites. In 1995, hazardous-waste manufacturers paid 82 percent of the cleanup costs, he said.

Benefield said the next step for her group is to get the attention of Montana's elected officials. The Community Advisory Group that's watchdogging asbestos issues in Libby sent letters to the state's congressional delegation last month, but got no direct response.

"Libby fell through the cracks in 1980 to 1982 when the Reagan administration cut funding," Benefield said. "We could fall through the cracks again."

"This is really a national issue. There are other Libbys out there."

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